

MENTORING VIGNETTES

1

A Mentor's Story...She looked away from me when I said it. Usually her eyes looked eagerly at mine like children's eyes do, but this time she looked away over my head. I thought she was embarrassed and I was sorry I'd said it. I only meant well. "I think you'd make a great teacher." That's what I said to her.

We were playing school and I was the student and she chose to be the teaching assistant. I asked her why she didn't want to be the teacher and I told her I thought she'd be wonderful. And she looked away from me, over my head, and I was sorry I'd asked.

The next time we played school was six weeks later. She made the rules. "You be the student," she told me, "and I'll be the teacher." She did a good job, too. We read a poem and then she asked me what it meant to me. She was looking right at me and she was smiling. I said, "You're doing great." "I think you'd make a great teacher" is all I'd said to her. I had been sorry last time, but now I was glad.

There's more. Three months later we played school again. I was the student. I asked her, "Are you the teacher?" "No," she grinned. "The principal." This time I didn't say anything. I didn't need to.

2

A Mentee's Story...I asked my mentor what I should say in my speech. He told me whatever I said would be great if it showed everybody what mentoring had meant to me. He said actions speak louder than words, and he knew I would be fine because my actions spoke loud enough to show them everything.

I hoped he was right. I mean, it was easy to show them. I showed them by fixing myself up. I got a haircut. I shaved. I showered before the party. I looked pretty good and clean, I have to say. But that part was easy. I was still wondering what I would say. That's what made me nervous.

The night of the party, I was standing there and I guess I felt kind of silly, but also kind of warm and proud. Not just proud of how clean I was. Proud. I said, "This is the best night of my whole life," and I felt a big bubble of happy inside me.

I said my life has changed, and I had stuff to look forward to, and felt like people believed in me. I think they liked to hear me say that almost as much as I liked to say it. And that made me even prouder than being clean did.

3

A Mentor's Story... The little guy really made me laugh. He sometimes had a mischievous look on his face when he spoke, like there was something he thought was funny that you wouldn't appreciate. He was seven years old, but he read people very well. Talking to him was wonderful. He made me laugh and he made me think.

I had fun with him the first week and I was looking forward to the second. I looked forward to talking with him, to see where the conversation would go. But he didn't come and I was awfully disappointed.

The week after that, the same happened. I was worried, so the following week I waited for him outside his classroom. He came out and saw me. If he was surprised, he didn't show it. I told him, "I was sad when you didn't come out last week or the week before." He got that look on his face. He asked me, "Did you get paid anyway?"

"I don't get paid," I said. The look went away when I said that. He looked surprised. He looked both sad and happy. For the first time, he didn't know what to think. I guess he figured it out, though, because he never missed a week after that.

4

A Mentor's Story... Sometimes my wife knows me better than I know myself, if you can believe that. She had to drag me kicking and screaming into mentoring. I swore I wouldn't be good at it: before I retired I had been a successful financial executive, and everything had a beginning and an end. But mentoring has no final answer, so I thought it wasn't my area.

I don't understand it. It's something I've never encountered before. He and I learn from each other, and we've both changed. We talk about school and we play catch and he's happy to be there, to see me. And I feel the same way. He's opened up, he's happier, he has something to look forward to.

As for me, I've started listening more and talking less. It's not the normal way adults talk to kids, but there's something about it. Just listening. You know, it's made me a better parent, too.

So my wife was right, and I'm grateful to her. I don't understand how, but mentoring has made me better, and helped me make someone else better too. There's just something about it.